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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 003233

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [FARC](#)

SUBJECT: FARC ATTACKS LOCALIZED TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

REF: A. BOGOTA 1812

[B](#). BOGOTA 2011

[C](#). BOGOTA 2304

[D](#). IIR 6819 1790-05

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (U) This cable replaces Bogota 3073 which was transmitted in error. Please destroy all prior copies.

[2](#). (S/NF) Summary. FARC violence in the first quarter of 2005, although tactically aggressive, remained localized and below 2004 levels in all categories: attacks against military and police, attacks against civilians, and attacks against infrastructure. Intelligence since November 2004 has indicated the FARC's desire to increase violence and disorder. It is not clear the degree to which these attacks are orchestrated by the FARC Secretariat or, more likely, are the product of a general order that operating units should be more aggressive. Attacks are limited and asymmetrical, and may arise from a variety of motives: to weaken Uribe during the pre-election period, to force diversion of resources away from the Plan Patriota offensive against the FARC stronghold, to take advantage of the purported "security vacuum" left by demobilizing paramilitaries, or simply to demonstrate continued FARC capabilities after a bad 2004. But the FARC's ability to achieve any of these goals through such pinprick attacks remains doubtful. The FARC has succeeded in a limited spike in violence, but not more than that. End Summary.

[3](#). (S/NF) Colombian military statistics indicate that, in spite of anecdotal and press impressions of increased FARC terrorism, FARC violence is still substantially below 2004 levels in all categories. Statistics show that first quarter 2005 attacks on military and police, and infrastructure, are all below the 2004 quarterly average and the first quarter of [2004](#). FARC attacks on civilians are virtually identical to the 2004 average or slightly higher (131 versus 124) than the first quarter in 2004. By regions, FARC attacks in the first quarter are significantly lower in the Caribbean and the south, and dramatically lower (39 versus 86 incidents) in the northwest. But attacks against civilians/civilians were greater in the west, the south and the east. All of which indicates that, although the number of attacks is down overall, the FARC may be aiming at higher profile targets, or conducting operations that result in higher casualties (we don't have casualty information for the first quarter yet).

[4](#). (S/NF) Evidence suggests that FARC leadership at the highest levels planned and ordered the recent spike in violence, although the level of senior leadership in selection of targets and other operational decisions is unclear. Some evidence suggests that FARC leaders simply called for all fronts to increase levels of violence by any means possible. It is also possible that the FARC is seeking to increase attacks: in areas outside the Plan Patriota offensive in order to force the government to divert resources, to try to establish a presence in former paramilitary areas, or simply to demonstrate their continued capability for violence after a bad 2004. Nevertheless, to what degree a strategic shift has occurred in FARC planning is less relevant than to what degree the guerillas can carry out attacks that influence the direction of the body politic.

[5](#). (C) The attacks in first quarter 2005 demonstrate FARC's classic terrorist strategy to hit where the enemy is weakest. This has proven for the FARC to be targets of opportunity--mainly elements of the Colombian military (COLMIL) taken off guard outside of the Plan Patriota area of operations, where the FARC remains weakened. The terrorist organization has also shown slight strategic shifts with regard to kidnapping and pipeline attacks. For example, the FARC kidnapped 11 people over the Holy Week holiday season in 2005 in Colombia, but instead of the more typical roadblock method, took people hostage on remote farmland in Antioquia and Valle del Cauca. The kidnapping figure was 24 people lower than in the same period of 2004, and showed the FARC's inability to control major roadways, which requires effective dominance of an area of territory. Also, with regard to pipeline attacks, the FARC has increased the number of

attacks, but shifted some of the focus away from Arauca Department in favor of attacks in Norte de Santander Department (ref C), where the pipeline traverses more remote and rugged terrain. Again, the FARC is moving to attack at the weakest points, but it shows little capacity in the face of a public security presence.

16. (S/NF) The possibility that the FARC is positioning itself to take control of areas vacated by demobilized paramilitaries is of public concern. First quarter attacks have shown some evidence of this, but not enough to suggest a pattern. Examples include the Holy Week kidnappings in Calima, Valle del Cauca, and Salgar, Antioquia, former paramilitary strongholds, and the pipeline attacks in Norte de Santander. Nevertheless, the FARC has yet to show a broad capacity to fill the purported "security vacuum" left by the demobilization of thousands of paramilitaries. Rather than gaining control of new territory, it appears the FARC is conducting small attacks to divert attention and perhaps resources away from the Plan Patriota area. The embassy will continue to monitor the status of former paramilitary held territory closely. For the moment it appears the battle for public perception on the issue will be more defining than any actual battle for territory.

17. (U) Despite FARC military activity, public support for President Uribe during the first quarter of 2005 remained very strong. In a Gallup/El Tiempo poll released March 17, 72 percent of Colombians polled had a favorable impression of President Uribe, and 67 percent were in favor of the idea of re-election for a second term. Further, 83 percent had a favorable opinion of the COLMIL, 73 percent voiced support for Plan Colombia, while 92 percent had a negative view of the FARC (and only 3 percent a favorable view). Finally, 69 percent of respondents said that they feel Colombia is more secure than one year ago, and 52 percent said they were against any exchange of FARC prisoners for the release of hostages.

18. (S/NF) Focusing more attention on the FARC's recent failed attempts, rather than dwelling on its strategic posturing, demonstrates that the FARC remains weakened and limited primarily to attacking targets of opportunity. For example, the FARC recently tried to destroy key electric towers around Bogota in an effort to leave the capital city dark for up to 24 hours. Not only were the explosive devices ineffective and poorly constructed, they were discovered by pedestrians who noticed suspicious packages in plain sight. The attempt showed bold intentions, but weak capacity. Another example was the FARC's inability to disrupt holiday travel during Holy Week, a key indicator of security levels and one felt personally by Colombians who remember what it was like to be under siege in the cities. The FARC tried to place an illegal roadblock on the road between Florencia (Caqueta) and Neiva (Huila), but again proved incapable of carrying out what could have been a significant attack.

19. (U) In the year leading up to elections, the spike in violence in the first quarter of 2005 has already generated significant public debate. The opposition is making exaggerated statements like that of leftist Representative Gustavo Petro that "what has happened is confirmation finally that Democratic Security is a failure." The GOC response, that these attacks are lamentable but have not undermined the government's strategy, continues to resonate with most Colombians.

Comment

10. (S/NF) No one should underestimate the FARC. After 40 years, they are patient. The FARC has managed to make headlines in the first quarter of 2005, and the cost of their attacks has been real. The COLMIL will need to avoid the mistakes that have led to losses during recent periphery attacks. But, while helping them review tactical security issues, we are advising no change in their strategic approach.
WOOD